[an error occurred while processing this directive] *Posted at 5:12 p.m. PDT Friday, July 6, 2001*

As their numbers shrink, Japanese-American heritage thrives

BY LORI ARATANI
Mercury News

John Tateishi, the grandson of Japanese immigrants, grew up in California during the 1950s when it would have been unheard of to marry anyone outside his own ethnic group.

Today, Tateishi, 61, is a leader in that community as executive director of the Japanese American Citizens League. And while he would like his children to marry other Japanese-Americans, he takes in stride the fact that his son dates an Iranian woman, his daughter a Latino man. What matters most, he said, ``is that my children are happy."

Dating, then marrying outside the community isn't a bigger issue for Japanese-Americans than for other ethnic groups. But combined with low birth rates and immigration that has slowed to a trickle, it helps explain a demographic quirk: The Japanese-American population is shrinking at a time when Census 2000 figures show explosive growth among Asians in America overall.

According to the census, the number of Asians in America grew by 48 percent in the previous decade to 10.2 million. But the number of Japanese decreased by 6 percent overall, and in California, home to the largest concentrations of Japanese outside of Hawaii, the number dropped 8 percent.

Even in San Jose, where a rapidly developing Japantown neighborhood still serves as a social and religious center, population numbers are down 3 percent.

``We're just not replacing our current population," said Larry Shinagawa, a professor at Sonoma State University.

What the Japanese-American population decline means for the future of the ethnicity once dominant among Asians in the United States is the subject of much debate. Some see declining numbers translating to diminished political influence. Others fear that if the trend continues, Japanese-Americans will cease to exist as a separate ethnic group and their culture will be lost.

Yet many are optimistic. ``It doesn't worry me," said Katie Hironaka, 81. ``I feel that the Japanese will still go on."

Contributing factors

Some attribute part of the decline to the new mixed-race option on the 2000 Census forms. But most explanations cite other factors.

The bulk of Japanese immigration took place from 1900 to 1920, with more than 213,000 entering America. These days, there is little immigration from Japan because it is a fully industrialized nation.

That contrasts with other Asian countries, including China and India, that were the starting points for many immigrants during the 1990s. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the number of immigrants from Japan in 1998 was 5,647 -- about one-eighth the number from China and one-sixth of those from India.

For many Japanese-Americans, there have been signs for years that the community is getting smaller.

Pam Yoshida, the daughter of strawberry farmers, need not look any further than her family to understand one reason for the decline: the birth rate. Her mother was one of eight children, her father one of 12. She was one of three in her family, and she and her husband have no children.

``The reasons to have large families have largely disappeared," she said, referring to past need to provide farm help. ``I mean, can you imagine raising 12 children these days?"

In many ways, the overall Japanese-American experience mirrors that of other ethnic groups. As subsequent generations are born, they assimilate and develop stronger ties to the United States.

But some experts say the assimilation process for Japanese-Americans may have been accelerated because of historical factors. During World War II, Japanese-Americans worked hard to show their patriotism. Even after their families were sent to internment camps, many young Japanese-Americans were eager to prove their loyalty and volunteered to serve in the armed forces.

There was ``tremendous pressure for Japanese-Americans to assimilate and to make Japanese culture as acceptable as possible," said Alex Yamato, a professor of Asian-American studies at San Jose State University.

Intermarriage contributes to assimilation. According to Shinagawa, the intermarriage rate for Japanese-American men is 50 percent, below the 60 percent rate for women -- though that figure includes Japanese nationals who marry American soldiers.

There are tangible signs of the shrinking population. Once more than 40 Japantowns and communities flourished in the United States. Today, only three remain -- San Jose, San Francisco and Los Angeles -- and the latter two are fighting to remain viable. Japanese-American newspapers are also struggling.

Rethinking identity

Changes in the community also have forced groups like the San Francisco-based Japanese American Citizens League to rethink what it means to be a Japanese-American at a time when many young people are of mixed ancestry.

Sue Sakai-McClure, 47, a Japanese-American who is married to a Irish-American, argues that the Japanese culture doesn't fade away simply because people choose to marry those of another ethnicity.

Her son, Conor and daughter, Addi, attend the San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin in Japantown, take Japanese language classes and dance in the Obon festival. In fact, her husband James is chairman of Obon, the annual Buddhist celebration of the dead.

``I think my children identify strongly with the Japanese culture because they spend so much time around the church and around other Japanese-Americans," she said.

Yet, even as some institutions in the Japanese-American community are fading away, others are thriving.

Across the country the number of groups performing the Japanese drumming art of taiko is growing. Around the Bay Area, there are waiting lists for admission to Japanese summer culture schools.

At San Jose's *Suzume no Gakko*, close to 100 students -- some from as far away as Oregon -- are enrolled in a three-week program, where they'll learn everything from how to make sushi to how to speak Japanese. Sprinkled in among the Nakayamas and Yamakoshis are names like Ozawa-Burns and Vasper.

``I know a few individuals of other ethnicities are more Japanese than some Japanese-Americans that I know," Yoshida said. ``Sometimes, it isn't just bloodline."

So far, their shrinking numbers haven't diminished Japanese-Americans' political influence. The majority of Asians serving in Congress are Japanese-American, including Reps. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, and Robert Matsui, D-Sacramento.

``I think if we are concerned that we're going to lose out in terms of our hold on the American dream, I don't think that's the case," Honda said. ``We're an example of an immigrant group that came at the turn of century, put up with generations of anti-Asian sentiment and survived, but held tight to our dreams and made it work."

In some ways, said Sonoma State's Shinagawa, Japanese-Americans may be at the forefront of a new change: the shift to a more pan-Asian identity as Asian-Americans.

``The concept of Japanese-American is almost outdated now," he said. ``In two or three generations it's going to be a much more symbolic identity. The concept of one identity is going to be very remote."

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